

Culturally responsive leadership

How one principal in an urban primary school responded successfully to Māori student achievement

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KEY POINTS

- The principal who was the subject of this study became principal of the case study school at the end of 2002. In 2004, reading achievement data at this school indicated that large numbers of Māori students were underachieving. The school leaders made changes. In 2009, 72 percent of Māori students were achieving at or above national expectations in reading.
- Strategies were identified that led to change. These strategies included: prioritising the importance and facilitation of face-to-face relationships; establishing systems and structures to support the development of relationships; and creating a culture of learning within the entire school community.
- Drawing on her own iwi understandings of te ao Māori and following cultural advice from local kaumātua, the researcher recognised that each of the three strategies that described *how* the principal approached leadership at the case study school could also be theorised in terms of Māori cultural metaphor and principles: whānau; kawa and tikanga; and akoranga.

Addressing the achievement disparities that exist within New Zealand education for Māori is identified by the Ministry of Education as being a critical challenge for school leaders that requires committed and responsive leadership (Ministry of Education, 2008b). The case study presented in this article describes the leadership practices of a primary school principal whose school is one where the majority of the Māori students were meeting or exceeding national expectations (for all students) in reading in 2009. The principal's theorising and associated practices provide a potential model for what constitutes culturally responsive leadership that facilitates success for Māori students.

In 1991, Graham Hingangaroa Smith referred to the low academic achievement of Māori students in mainstream education as being the "Māori educational crisis" (p. ii). Over the two decades that have passed since 1991 Bishop and Glynn (1999) and others (Alton-Lee, 2008; Bishop, Berryman, Cavanagh & Teddy, 2007; Macfarlane, 2004, 2007; Phillips, McNaughton & MacDonald, 2001) have also expressed concerns about the achievement disparities between Māori and non-Māori students. In response to these concerns, addressing the educational crisis by raising Māori student achievement has become a major government priority. This priority is reflected in Ministry of Education policy document *Ka Hikitia—Managing for Success: The Māori Education Strategy 2008–2012*, as "Māori enjoying education success as Māori" (Ministry of Education, 2008a, p. 14); it is the reoccurring flagship statement of this document. Additionally, *Kiwi Leadership for Principals* and *The Professional Leadership Plan* specifically highlight the central role that leaders play in meeting this challenge (Ministry of Education 2008b, 2009).

This acknowledgement of the connection between leadership practice and student achievement is supported by Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson and Wahlstrom (2004) who, in a large review of school leadership literature, found that "leadership is second only to classroom instruction among all school-related factors that contribute to what students learn at school" (p. 5). Robinson, Hohepa and Lloyd (2009), in their Best Evidence Synthesis iteration on school leadership, also conclude that "school leaders can indeed make a difference to student achievement" (p. 35), especially when leaders promote and participate in teacher learning and development. In New Zealand schools Robinson et al. propose that,

"the fundamental challenge for educational leaders across the system is to raise achievement and reduce disparity" (p. 35). Additionally, they suggest that the second challenge for educational leadership is to, "improve educational provision for and responsiveness to Māori students" (p. 54).

The publications detailed above serve as evidence that the Ministry of Education expects school leadership to respond to the challenge of raising Māori student achievement. However, what is not so obvious in the Ministry's documents is a clear definition or model of what this response might look like.

The setting

When the research was undertaken, the researcher was a deputy principal in a primary school where the majority of Māori students were not meeting national expectations in reading and their achievement levels in reading were lower than non-Māori students. She recognised that this situation was unacceptable and that as a school leader she had a responsibility to find solutions. Recognition of these two facts prompted her to undertake research to examine the theories and practices that a principal implements in a school where the majority of Māori students *are* achieving national expectations in reading.

The principal who was the subject of this study was a non-Māori woman who became the principal of the case study school at the end of 2002. In 2004, reading achievement data at this school indicated that large numbers of Māori students were underachieving. This situation prompted the school leaders to review teaching practice within the school and engage in professional development and

research to enhance their understandings about effective pedagogy. In 2009, 5 years on from the inception of the professional learning, 72 percent of Māori students were achieving at or above national expectations in reading.

The case study school was a decile 5, contributing primary school (Years 1–6) located in an urban setting. At the time the research was undertaken, the school roll was 511 with an ethnic composition of 44 percent Māori, 51 percent European/Pākehā and 5 percent identified as “Other”. The research examined the leadership practices of the principal and sought to investigate what the principal understood about culturally responsive leadership and how these theories were implemented in the practices of this school community.

Method

A mixed-methods approach (employing quantitative and qualitative data) was used. This approach enabled the principal’s leadership practice to be examined through the analysis of student-achievement data, school documents, and through a series of in-depth interviews with the principal, members of the senior leadership team and a group of teachers. The key question that this research aimed to explore was how a principal in a primary school ensured that Māori students achieved.

Participant observations of the principal were followed by a stimulated-recall interview and a series of semistructured interviews as conversations. Within these interviews the principal was asked to explain what she understood culturally responsive leadership to be and to describe how these understandings were translated into practice in terms of the school systems and structures. A group of senior teachers and a group of classroom teachers constituted two separate focus groups. Within semistructured interviews these participants were also asked to explain what they understood culturally

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Ethical requirements of the University of Waikato were adhered to, such as protecting the privacy of research participants through the use of the pseudonym “Kōwhai School”.

Findings

The researcher set out to enable the principal to reflect on, deconstruct and then reconstruct her understandings about culturally responsive leadership and the resulting practices that were developed and implemented between 2004 and 2009. Three distinct and interrelated strategies were identified that reflected the understandings characterised by this principal’s leadership practice. These strategies included:

1. prioritising the importance and facilitation of face-to-face relationships
2. establishing systems and structures to support the development of relationships
3. creating a culture of learning within the entire school community.

Additionally, drawing on her own iwi understandings of te ao Māori and following cultural advice from local kaumātua, the researcher recognised that each of the three strategies that described *how* the principal approached leadership at the case study school could also be theorised in terms of Māori cultural metaphor and principles. The concept of *whānau* literally refers to family and extended family. However, used in its metaphorical sense, *whānau* encompasses the notion that people and groups are able to be connected to one another and engaged with like family via relationships of care and respect. *Kawa* and *tikanga*: *kawa* refers to cultural protocols (the ‘what’), and *tikanga* refers to the cultural practices that are facilitated (the ‘how’). In a metaphorical sense *kawa* and *tikanga* reflect the organisational systems and structures that operate within the school. The term “*akoranga*” captures the concept of reciprocal learning. In the case-study school, everyone is a learner, and is thus able to be engaged in learning from one another and participate in a culture of learning. Each of the strategies and the corresponding practices are discussed in the next section.

Discussion

Whānau: Developing relationships for quality teaching and learning

The principal felt that the research which the staff had engaged in to deepen their understanding of effective pedagogy had reinforced her own personal theorising regarding the centrality of relationships both in the classroom setting and in the wider school setting. Consequently, the development of face-to-face *whānau* relationships was identified as being a critical component of the principal’s leadership practice, both within the school and within the wider community.

Respect and care were the values identified by the principal that served as broad guidelines for how she developed relationships and a commitment to gain mutual trust, maintain dignity (*mana*) and engender a sense of teamwork through unity and collaboration (*kotahitanga*). These values governed the way interactions occurred within the school. She made frequent references to genuinely caring about how people feel and the importance of demonstrating care and respect through verbal acknowledgement, smiling and physical gestures (handshakes and hugs). She believed that this approach had helped her to develop connectedness and gain trust, which in turn supported her endeavours to work with people: “I like to be respected and I like other people to know that I respect them. It’s about caring about how people feel, walking in their shoes and being there for them.”

The principal worked hard to develop relationships *with* students, parents, other community members and staff. She also believed that in her role as principal it was extremely important for her to support the development of relationships *amongst* teachers, students and parents. She proposed that providing opportunities to have conversations with and listen to Māori students, *whānau* and the wider Māori community enabled the school leadership team (including herself) and teachers to gain a deep understanding of where students are from and what they bring into the school setting. This included finding out about the expectations and the aspirations that parents had for their children. This process of developing interdependence involved listening to people and providing an opportunity for students, parents and staff to listen to and gain an understanding of her:

I do my very best to build a relationship with them; to understand their needs, their wants, their aspirations, their dreams and to be able to respond accordingly. So for me it’s—well I guess the first thing is to build relationships with people to let them know where I’m from, where I’m coming from but also to try and gain an understanding

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about themselves and what they bring and where they come from and work through from there.

As well as ensuring that leaders and teachers were building interdependent relationships with students, parents and community members, the principal was also cognisant of the quality of internal relationships between leaders, teachers and administration staff. She had worked hard, for example, to change what had been a rigid top-down management structure before 2004. An inclusive and cohesive school culture was developed. Staff were provided with opportunities to share their ideas and perspectives, and were subsequently empowered to contribute to decision making.

The principal suggested that this face-to-face dialogue and relationship building helped to eliminate “guesswork” when it came to identifying possible barriers and opportunities for student and teacher learning. Crucially, understandings that were gained from conversations with Māori students, parents, fellow leaders, teachers and administration staff informed and guided the development of a shared vision. This vision was to ensure that *all* students (particularly those being least served in the school in terms of education success) were better able to achieve academic success. Endeavours to achieve this vision resulted in the subsequent establishment of a new range of school systems and structures.

Kawa and tikanga—systems and structures

To reiterate, the principal had first worked with school stakeholders to establish institutions to support the development of quality relationships and quality teaching and learning. She then set about working with staff to develop a range of school documents to clarify and

communicate expectations regarding classroom teaching practice.

Institutions to support the development of quality relationships and teaching and learning included providing multiple opportunities for engagement with school families, particularly Māori whānau. The principal endeavoured to personally enrol students and attend pōwhiri that were held to welcome new students and families who joined the school's rumaki (immersion) unit. Regular parental meetings, information evenings and events to celebrate learning were formally timetabled into the school schedule each term. Student drop-off and pick-up times were also targeted by teachers as informal opportunities to talk with parents about their children and to talk with the children on a one-to-one basis themselves:

Teacher: We really encourage those kids to share their knowledge and what they know, and when we've had Pijian and Tongan [students]—it's about building those relationships and making sure that you make that connection with those kids, you know talk to them one on one, because you know some of the kids are a bit shy about their culture so you know make sure that you make an effort—every morning.

It was extremely important to the principal that parents understood that the school's open-door policy genuinely meant that they were able to come into the school on their own terms and talk with her, or teachers, or all. This included allowing parents to share anger and frustration:

Principal: We encourage that face-to-face dialogue with parents for every opportunity—the good and the bad. They can come in and often just vent, is really, really important and in some cases I'm just the listener and the parent will come in and say "This is how it is for me"—and I listen, because their perception is their reality. If it's something that can be talked through over a cup of tea between the two of us—with me then followed up with the teacher then we do that otherwise I will say "I'd like to bring the teacher in and we'll have a chat about it together—how do you feel about that?", often that's the way it goes.

Regular meetings between the senior leadership team, teachers and administration staff had also been instituted to ensure that there were shared understandings about how staff relate to and interact with students, parents and one another. These meetings also provided opportunities for staff to have their voices heard and professional needs responded to in an individual and collective way.

Important policies that guided the school, such as the curriculum delivery policy, the Treaty of Waitangi policy, the appraisal and attestation policy, and the school charter and strategic plan were used by the senior leadership as a basis to develop a wide range of school documents that were referred to as practice guidelines. These guidelines had been developed in conjunction with teachers and contained expectations regarding relationships and classroom

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teaching practice. One example of a document that guided internal relationships among staff detailed how teachers and administration staff were expected to relate to and interact with one another in four areas, namely: meetings; team work; acknowledging achievement, success and effort; and dealing with conflict. An example of a document that was developed to support classroom practice included a booklet that detailed key understandings about effective pedagogy that had emerged as a result of the professional development and research. These key understandings formed the basis of an internally developed school learning framework entitled “Personalised Learning”. This framework is described in greater detail in the next section.

The leadership team continuously reviewed the school's institutions to ensure that they were being effective in terms of providing opportunities for all stakeholders to be heard and responded to. Additionally, the school documents were constantly adapted and updated to reflect the understandings that were transpiring as a result of conversations with students and parents, and the ongoing dialogue in the professional development programme. The principal believed it was essential that the systems and structures that articulated “how we do things around here” supported her and the leadership team to create a culture of learning in the school. She also believed that all stakeholders (which included whānau) needed to have an opportunity to contribute to the school learning community. This would enable stakeholders (as a collective) to make progress towards achieving the vision of ensuring students achieved academic success.

Akoranga—Creating a culture of learning

The principal felt confident that there was a critical mass of teachers within her school who understood the quality relationships that were central to quality teaching. A concentrated focus on the development of face-to-face whānau relationships and the establishment of systems and structures to support this focus had also resulted in what they referred to as their Personalised Learning framework. This Personalised Learning

framework (practice guidelines) ensured that teachers needed to recognise the prior knowledge and experiences of students, and respond accordingly through co-constructed teaching and learning practices. The principal and teachers proposed that this responsive and more interactional approach to teaching enabled Māori students in particular to bring their cultural knowledge and sense making—or more specifically what Bruner (1996) refers to as their “cultural toolkit”—into the classroom so that they could engage in learning “as Māori”. Students were encouraged to establish their own learning goals, choose their own strategies to solve learning problems and to contribute to decisions about curriculum content. Parents and whānau members were also invited into school to contribute their knowledge, skills and expertise which meant that teachers frequently found themselves in the role of co-learners rather than as the “experts”. This represented a stark contrast to the teacher-directed “one-size fits all” teaching approaches that had previously characterised classroom practices in the case study school, such as standardised worksheets and prepackaged thematic units (that did not necessarily reflect the prior knowledge or interests of Māori students) purchased from education resource suppliers.

The principal and her leadership team were committed to maintaining the professional development initiatives that were deepening their collective understandings about effective pedagogy. The principal had read and synthesised literature pertaining to New Zealand research about culturally responsive pedagogies and had identified consistencies between the Personalised Learning framework and the Te Kotahitanga Effective Teaching Profile that had been used with success to raise the achievement of Māori students in secondary schools (Bishop et al., 2007).

The principal observed the assertion made by Robinson et al. (2009) about the importance of school leaders promoting and participating in teacher learning. Therefore, all members of the leadership team have continued to immerse themselves, as learners, in all aspects of professional development. This engagement in professional development with teachers allowed the principal to make connections between the theories that were discussed in meetings and the practice that she observed in classrooms. Furthermore, in appraisal and attestation dialogue sessions the principal respectfully challenged staff to examine their assumptions and to critically reflect on their teaching practice.

The principal proposed that the process of critically reflecting on teaching practice had resulted in leaders and teachers taking greater personal and professional responsibility for Māori student achievement. Where they would formerly attribute underachievement to deficiencies

in Māori students, or their whānau, or both, teachers subsequently referred to their own teaching practices and learning programmes as a means of explaining reduced student performance. Holding themselves and one another to account for the achievement of their Māori students had become an entrenched habit for leaders and teachers:

Principal: If we've got a tail of non-achievers and they're mainly Māori students then there is something that we are not doing right here. If they're not achieving—it's not their fault, I say to myself and to my staff, 'So what are we missing? What aren't we doing that we should be doing?'

Teacher 1: You've got to be a really good reflective teacher, and if there's kids in your class that are from another culture and it's not quite working for them well, you know you have to step back and have a look—you know—'What am I doing that's not quite right for them?'

Teacher 2: I always critique myself. If a child is not coming to school as often as they should be—I have to take a look at myself!

The principal was acutely aware that it was Māori students, their whānau and their communities who needed to define whether academic success was achieved “as Māori”. She viewed the partnership between the school, Māori whānau and the community as being fundamental to her endeavours to ensure Māori students achieved success “as Māori”. It is also important to note that the principal worked particularly closely with four teachers from the school's rumaki unit to integrate kaupapa Māori principles and practices into mainstream curriculum and teaching practices. These teachers and kaumatua (elders from the Māori community) provided the principal and the teachers from the mainstream classrooms with valuable support and guidance, particularly with regard to developing and maintaining respectful relationships with Māori whānau and community members.

While the three leadership strategies have been explained in a linear arrangement it is important to acknowledge that they were not necessarily operationalised in a sequential manner (Macfarlane, 2006). Relationships, for example, informed the development of systems and structures within the

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school, and they also informed how learners engaged and participated in the culture of learning. Additionally, systems and structures were able to be modified and adapted as a result of the knowledge that was generated within the learning forum. Rather than viewing each strategy as a distinct and separate component or phase, it was perhaps more appropriate to consider the strategies in terms of “layers” of the environment such as the ecological systems theory presented by Bronfenbrenner (1986).

Bronfenbrenner (1986) proposes that a child’s environment is structured in a series of layers or systems. Consideration of the three strategies that characterised the principal’s approach to leadership at Kōwhai School in relation to Bronfenbrenner’s microsystem, mesosystem and macrosystem highlights notable similarities. These similarities are represented in the model in Figure 1.

The microsystem reflects the child’s immediate environment such as the family and school setting, and it encompasses relationships and interactions (Berk, 2000). The mesosystem provides for connections between individuals within the microsystem (Berk, 2000) which is essentially the function of the systems and structures at Kōwhai School. The macrosystem is a larger system that represents the cultural context which influences how individuals carry out their relations (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). This is consistent with the principal’s endeavours to create a school culture of learning.

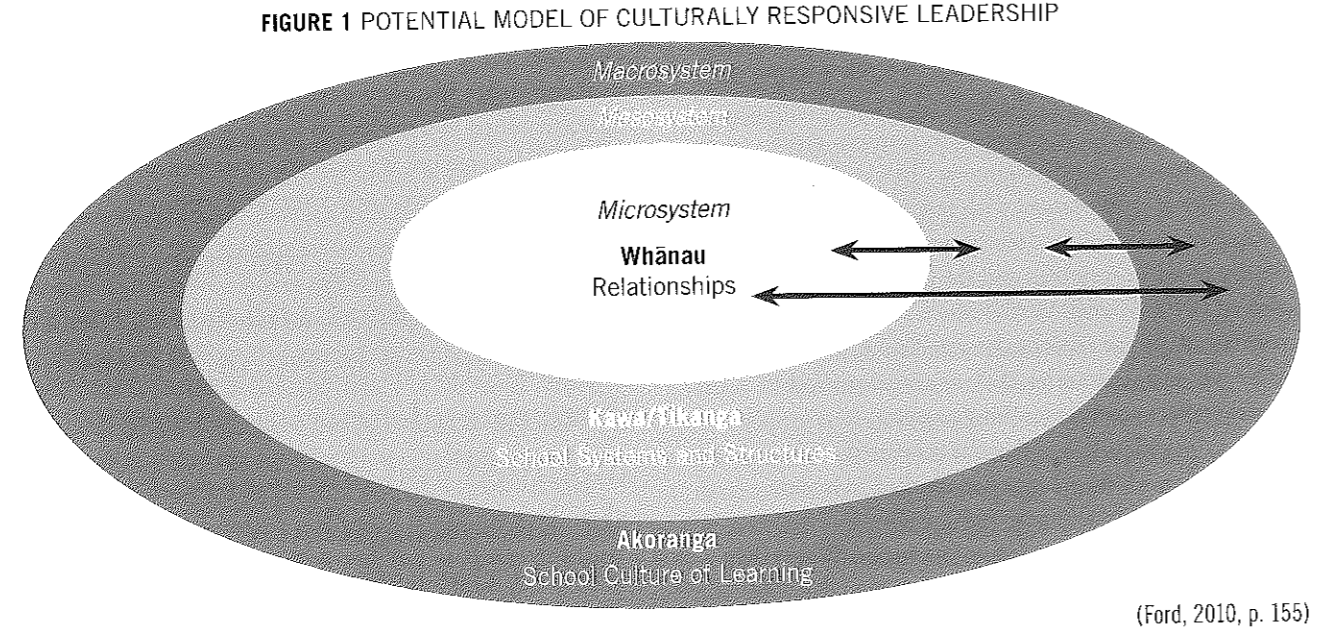
Bronfenbrenner (1990) further suggests that bidirectional influences occur within and between systems which can affect a child’s development. This is just as relationships, systems and structures, and the school culture of learning at Kōwhai School were interrelated and influenced the way all learners (leaders,

teachers, students, parents and whānau) contributed to and participated in the school culture of learning.

Conclusion

The principal attributes the improvements in Māori student achievement since 2004 to shifts in the pedagogical understandings of leaders and teachers at Kōwhai School. While the principal was satisfied that 81 of the 121 Māori students (72 percent) were achieving and exceeding national expectations in reading in 2009 she recognised that 30 Māori students (28 percent) were still not achieving to their potential and that this latter issue needed to be addressed. Additionally in that same year, 72 percent of the Māori students realised the aspiration of *Ka Hikitia—Managing for Success: The Māori Education Strategy 2008–2012* and were (according to the principal and their teachers) “enjoying education success as Māori” (Ministry of Education, 2008a, p. 14). Consequently, she continues to work closely with Māori whānau and the Māori community to create a school culture of learning that facilitates a situation whereby *all* Māori students are able to achieve the same education goal.

While this narrative of one school principal’s culturally responsive leadership practice may provide a useful framework for educators to consider, it is unrealistic to suggest that this model represents the supreme solution to raising Māori student achievement within mainstream primary schools. Further research is needed to explore the concept of culturally responsive leadership which might include student and whānau voice, a larger principal participant cohort over a longer period or, conversely, several more small case studies to identify recurring key themes.



It must be remembered that Māori student achievement is a complex issue. Positive outcomes can be attributed to a range of elements, and proactive leadership is only one implication. Nevertheless, this small study has provided some interesting insights into school leadership practices which could potentially influence the fundamental challenge posed by Robinson et al. (2009) that is facing education leaders in New Zealand today: to raise achievement, reduce disparities and provide culturally responsive education to Māori.

This research has provided an insight into how a primary school principal works with her school stakeholders (whānau and community) to create a context that enables Māori students to achieve. The development of relationships with and among the entire school community to inform teaching and learning was prioritised by the school principal. Her subsequent practices resulted in the establishment of systems and structures to support the development of good relationships for quality teaching and learning. Aligning the shared vision with the systemic infrastructure and having a clear and succinct focus on pedagogy has created a culture of learning where the underachievement of students, particularly Māori, is no longer tolerated. Members of the school community share ownership of the performance of students, themselves and one another. In essence, the notions of *whānau*,

kawa and tikanga, and *akoranga* were central to a school and community-wide strategic approach to responding positively to educational disparities for Māori students.

The principal conceded that the learning journey to shift pedagogical understandings and change teaching practice that Kōwhai School community engaged in during the five years between 2004 and 2009 was at times very challenging personally, as well as for her fellow leaders and teachers. However, as a learning community they have seen that the changes have had a considerable and positive impact on student achievement, particularly Māori student achievement. These improvements provide the motivation to continue to invest the effort that is necessary to completely eliminate any educational achievement disparities between Māori and non-Māori so that the “Māori educational crisis” that Graham Smith talked about in 1991 becomes our history as opposed to being our current reality. This position is aptly summarised in the following statement:

Principal: We are tracking the achievement of our Māori students—all of our students—but paying particular attention to our Māori students and making sure that tail—the difference that we had between Māori and non-Māori is reducing, or—we’re not getting one! That’s what we would really love to have is not a tail at all—to have all of our students achieving where they should be.

TABLE 1 LEADERSHIP STRATEGIES AND PRACTICES

LEADERSHIP STRATEGY	1st LEVEL PRACTICES	2nd LEVEL PRACTICES
Whānau Prioritise the development of face-to-face relationships.	LEADER ↔ CHILDREN ↔ TEACHING STAFF ↔ ADMINISTRATION STAFF ↔ PARENTS	CHILDREN ↔ TEACHING STAFF ↔ PARENTS
Kawa/tikanga Establish systems and structures to support the development of face-to-face relationships.	<i>School Documents</i> School Policies: Curriculum Policy Treaty of Waitangi Policy <i>Pattern for immediate and direct contact:</i> Enrolment meetings with parents and involvement in pōwhiri Weekly meetings with leadership team, teachers and admin staff Formal consultation meetings with parents Attendance at community events	<i>Teachers' Documents</i> Team Charter Attestation & Appraisal Book Personalised Learning Book <i>Pattern for immediate and direct contact</i> Teacher interactions with students before and after school Open door policy for parental interaction between teachers and parents Open evenings for parents to come into school and be involved
Akoranga Create a culture of learning	Collaboratively sets goals expectations: • school charter & strategic plan • appraisal—classroom observations and feedback Supports teachers to be learners and participates in teacher learning. Includes parents and whānau in learning High expectations Rejects deficit theorising about students and teachers Accepts ownership of teacher learning and student learning	Personalised Learning Culturally responsive teaching practices are interactive and reflect knowledge of learners Teachers have high expectations that all students can achieve Teachers critically reflect on their practice Teachers use evidence of student performance to inform their practice Teachers reject deficit theorising about students Teachers accept ownership of student learning

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